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“QUID RIDES?”

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Many have been the attempts to explain and justify the fact of laughter. For fact it is, and in spite of differing theories men laugh as they love and worship—as if there were no such thing as philosophy. According to the principle of natural selection, the fact of laughter is much of its justification. In the countless changes through which life passes in its evolution, all species of form and action have at some point of time their opportunity. If helpful they persist; if not, they die out. Laughter has persisted; it is this day man's possession in fee simple.

This attempt is to define some of the legion theories of laughter; to view Plautus' comic genius in the light of these; lastly to give a philistine interpretation (I fear) of his homespun genius, regarding him also as typical of his age. For an author is as much the expression of his own personality, race, and period of history as he is a conformist or non-conformist to the broad, general rules of his art.

Theories of the comic have been only less few than theories of beauty and morality. Aristotle in his *ex cathedra* fashion condemns Plautus unborn. Comedy is an imitation of characters of a lower type—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad. The ludicrous, *τὸ γελοῖον*, is a subdivision of the ugly, *τὸ αἰσχρόν*, and consists in “some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive.” Aristotle really sets forth no expanded or adequate theory; he condemns wholesale, snappishly. Tragedy and the epic rank high; comedy is dismissed without audience. It will be seen from these *peu de mots* that Aristotle placed the ludicrous wholly in character, omitting any consideration of the comic value of situation. To be sure the comic does not exist outside of the pale of what is human; but human touches more than “character.” Further by an association characteristically Hellenic, *τὸ αἰσχρόν*, physical,

is linked with *τὸ αἰσχρόν*, moral; ("ugly" and "disgraceful" are this day confused). Therein lies the germ of the principle of degradation.

No higher regard for the comic comes from the brain of two philosophical Englishmen, some centuries separated from their father in theory. These are Sir Thomas Hobbes and Sir Philip Sidney, the literary idealist. Plautus ere now has made his comic bow and departed this world. Of these Hobbes is the more articulate. It is to be noted that when Hobbes asserts his dogma, *illo puncto temporis*, Molière across the channel nullifies it. But Hobbes's doctrine has nevertheless acquired just fame. "The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the inferiority of others or with our own formerly." Laughter, then, arises not immediately from a perception of something low or undignified, but mediately from this perception. In enjoying the ludicrous, we consciously realize superiority. Laughter has a characteristic taste of contempt. To Hobbes the comic writer is not a humorist but a satirist. Again the principle of degradation.

A later twist in this theory from "those who know," is that of Alexander Bain. "The occasion of the ludicrous is the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity, in circumstances that excite no other emotion." Here as in Aristotle's theory certain limiting conditions, e.g., absence of counteracting emotions such as pity or disgust, are recognized. But the fundamental theory is unchanged. Comedy, then, is permissible as literature but does not rank very high. The comic playwright shows up the foibles of mankind with something of a superior delight; the audience view the same with a superior (perhaps unconscious), yet contemptuous air. Comedy has no sublime function akin to tragedy's *katharsis*.

The distinctive mark of another theory is that instead of placing behind our enjoyment of the ludicrous an emotion, i.e., a sense of superiority, it premises a purely intellectual attitude a lofty conception of laughter, yet narrowly definitive. Laughter results from an effect upon our intellectual faculties such as the nullification of a process of expectation or expectant tendency. This follows an

attempt to bring together things too incongruous to be combined. The mind expecting to find something, finds nothing. This disinterested intellectual process results in the feeling of the ludicrous and its expression in laughter. Those who voice this philosophy are Kant and Schopenhauer; and it is indeed a characteristic German philosophy of the nineteenth century which regards all human conduct from a purely rational standpoint. Laughter, then, is menial to the hard taskmistress, Reason.

Two men of the last and present generation have unique opinions about comedy and the comic theory. Bergson, the French psychologist, frankly states at the beginning of his famous essay^{*} the difficulty of isolating an element common to a number of things. "What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque, and a scene in high comedy?"

Bergson begins with some fundamental observations:

1. Laughter has a deep social significance; it is always in the pale of the strictly human; it must re-echo as far as possible in society. It cannot be the esoteric laugh of a gloomy satirist or of anyone aloof or superior. (Comic here receives a more lofty place than Aristotle would give it.)

2. The relation of art to the comic. Comedy, a contrast to other arts, lies midway between art and life; by transferring laughter to the stage, it creates works which belong to art, their aim being to please. On the other hand, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment; here it differs from permanent art which is a breaking away from society and an effort to reveal pure nature.

After this broad and acceptable exegesis of the comic, Bergson proceeds in a very novel manner to reduce all forms of the ludicrous to a substitution in movement or language or action of the mechanical rigidity (*raideur*) of a machine, for the suppleness and changeability of an organism. The comic character does not make a study of others as well as himself. Rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness, unsociability, are all mingled in his character. This absent-mindedness lives upon him without forming an integral

^{*} *Le Rire*.

part of his being—a sort of De Bergerac nose encumbering the free exercise of his faculties. This rigidity at the root of the comic compels its subjects to adhere to one line of action and follow this unswervingly. This is rather after Jonson's definition of humor "A peculiar quality overcoming a man, making him incline all one way."

Along this line Bergson points out an essential difference between tragedy and comedy in the portrayal of character. Tragedy is concerned with individuals, comedy with classes of individuals. The writer of tragedy need not study other men as must the writer of comedy. The former works introspectively, scanning in himself all the variety of man he might have been; the latter observes objectively other men. It may happen that the comic playwright is himself in one direction a fit subject for comedy; if so, he would not be conscious that he is ridiculous because his unsocial rigidity would remain hidden from his own consciousness.

To round out his theory, Bergson sees this *raideur* not only in comic character and action but even in comic words. After an elaboration on the much-discussed terms wit and humor, he concludes that words become comic by "repetition," "inversion," "reciprocal interference," these being artificial restrictions and bonds upon their normal usage.

In high contrast to a psychologist's attitude is that of a man of letters. In one thing do Bergson and Meredith agree both place comedy on a much higher literary and mental plane than do their predecessors in criticism. In elevating comedy, Meredith is careful to exorcise what to him are not true types of comedy and the comic spirit. He distinguishes "high" comedy, the comedy of manners, from lower forms, for instance, romantic comedy and farce. Meredith finds but few plays and playwrights who have reached the heights of pure comedy untainted by farce. Evidently true comedy is a thing more difficult to achieve than tragedy (a sheer contradiction of Aristotle). Comedy's function is to paint manners, i.e., conventional life (cf. Bergson's society vs. nature). Meredith's tribute, then, would belong to a narrow class of literary artists, those who most closely have conformed to Cicero's definition of comedy, "*imitatio vitae, speculum con-*

suetudinis, imago veritatis." The few great comic poets, according to Meredith, have been philosophers who thought deeply on life—Menander, Terence, Molière, Congreve—for these have painted manners. The laughter of this true comedy is impersonal and of great politeness; it is nearer a smile. It is thoughtful and spiritual, the laughter of the mind for the mind directs it. In this Meredith follows the aristocratic tendency of a Sidney or a Landor who would despise the laughter of abandon—carefree, hearty, and robust. Says Landor with Meredith, "Genuine humor and true wit require a sound and capacious mind, which is always a grave one." Yet for Meredith the comic muse is not contemptuous; she is restrained and thoughtful but in no way anti-social. The Comic Spirit is the child of common sense. It is the laughter which is to set a measure upon society when it becomes disproportionate in any way. It lives and breathes by happy chance outside of its traditional dramatic form; for instance, his *Egoist* Meredith frankly calls a comedy in narrative form. Nay, to him many a writer has proved himself a comic genius in narrative and risen no higher than farce in drama; e.g., Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* vs. *She Stoops to Conquer*. Meredith, then, while elevating and honoring the Comic Muse, honors a lady of very select tastes.

Of comic creeds these are the chief. In the light of these can we present a case for Plautus?

Let us review in brief these theories as stated, to discover their limitations. The theory of laughter as a form of degradation in the object laughed at, practically limits comedy to the field of satire. In satire there is ridicule divorced from kindliness, "hard hitting" usually with a moral purpose in view. Applied to the motives of an Aristophanes or a Shaw, the theory is complete.

In any other form of the comic the theory does not apply. Surely there is no maliciousness in Shakespeare's treatment of the characters in his romantic comedies, those creatures of the "woods and wilds"; he is sympathetic even in his pictures of the "worldly," e.g., Falstaff or Katherine the Shrew. There is no more intent here to degrade or moralize or correct than there is in the rollicking fun of a Plautus. As for Plautus we feel that he identifies himself

with his rogues; he breathes the same air at the same level; he is a joyous participant, not a lofty observer.

Outside the field of character the theory applies not at all. A witty retort, a good pun, a skilful turning of words so as to give a new and startling meaning, does not move the muscles of laughter by a perception of degradation in language. Or in situations—Sosia 2, the servant, meets Sosia 2 (Mercury disguised) and is confounded by his second self. Surely as regards the juxtaposition of the situation, our laughter is not in superior delight.

Lastly, this theory would class all laughter as a mediate result dependent upon a prior evaluation. Without this prior perception, the necessary inferiority could not be established. That laughter is always a mediate process, can well be doubted; more often it is an immediate reaction unexpected and startling to the laugher as well as the laughee.

Laughter, a form of the intellect as Kant would have it, calls for an even greater ponderosity of thought. We may well doubt if men come to the theater weighted down intellectually. For an esoteric group who enjoy "closet drama" (*bon à mettre au cabinet*) rather than the stuff acted out, let laughter mentally digested be the portion. But surely the sudden laugh of exuberance, a reflex as it were, is no less noble a thing than the reflective smile. Men need not be ashamed of their reflex actions.

So this theory divorces comedy from the stage—an impossibility on the face of it—and takes no account of the greater portion of men's cachinnation—sudden laughter which is felt not analyzed, an immediate, not a mediate thing, as Schopenhauer would have it.

Bergson's social significance of laughter is being more and more appreciated. His mainstay is that the ridiculous is present where the automatic is foisted upon life. We have small difficulty in finding stiff mechanical effects which amuse us in gestures, situations, and character. His theory applies at once to the rigid virtues and vices, to minds possessed of an *idée fixe*, for instance, Tartuffe's blind hypocrisy, Uncle Toby's innocence, the self-worship of Willoughby Patterne, the avarice of Euclio. And many examples of *raideur* may be found in situations and words. But the most surprising thing is that Bergson never refers to a

complementary group of facts, instances of excessive spontaneity and freedom of movement where we cannot look for repression and mechanical uniformity. Many-sidedness and exuberance are surely as comical as the lack of a sign of full play on life may be in other circumstances. Falstaff is more than a liar; he is a coward and a buffoon. Plautus' slaves are comic but of the prancing, dancing, variable type. Willamant is a lady of dignity and a tease withal, changeable as a weather-cock. And hosts of men and women have walked the comic stage in complex and varied garb, exuberant and flexible in their individuality, not rigid in type form.

Meredith adapts a definite theory to definite facts; but his theory is very limited as his facts are. The doors of his comic mansion are closed and bolted to the vast number who in the past centuries have aroused men's laughter. Pitifully few are the geniuses who hold the key which permits them to pass the gates into the *Comicum Comitorium*. We may indeed be grateful to Meredith for his high conception of the comic. He honors the muse of comedy as she has never been honored before; but to make her such an exalted lady is to invest her with something of tragic awfulness. She is not free and easy; she does not mingle with all mankind, only with the few of intellectual laughter. She seeks the delight which in Sidney's mind was nobler than laughter. Her coterie is small; there is no freemasonry, no wide-spread democracy in her kingdom of laughter. It cannot but be remarked that of the four whom Meredith ranks as chief among comic dramatists two failed of an audience for their plays, while Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Plautus, who are discountenanced, had an immediate public. There is surely some warrant for saying that if these plays are outside comic rules and yet have pleased to furnish lasting food for laughter, the comic rules may be at fault rather than the plays: *Non sequitur*.

No human faculty is really accounted for when various stages of theory development have been pointed out. It is not the intention here to piece together a Plautine theory from a study of his plays. Or to establish any other creed. It is doubtful if a comprehensive and adequate theory of the comic would help the

enjoyment of the ludicrous. Men may live by rule; but they will not learn to laugh by rule. The comic is in its way like a beautiful statue or a piece of music; a matter not to reason about but to recognize. It calls for an almost juvenile acceptance, not for a mature discrimination.

There is a quality in laughter which we must recognize as essential and worthy if we seek to understand the laughter of a Plautus; it seems that this is the important element which has been omitted in these theories. It is the element of child's play. If in any essential the child is father to the man, it lies in the fact of human laughter. A child is naturally gay; the seriousness of life has not chained his risible faculties. None of your learned men make mention of this laughter which is but the calling out of this child nature within us, the play instinct; it eschews deep thought, insists on being carefree, rippling, exuberant. There is the intellectual smile, the seriousness of delight, the reasoned laughter, but these smack of the "grown-up." Impulsive mirth is juvenile. In the wit and humor of life, the give and take of repartee, comes the hearty and sudden rebound which is the saving childishness of maturer years. This, I take it, is the essential nature of Plautus' comic genius. And in this he was one with the men of his time. Like Shakespeare he was the unconscious artist, careless of posterity's comment:

Does mad and fantastic execution,
With such a careless force and forceless care.

He lived whole-souled with his generation. Moreover, to say that Plautus wrote simply for box receipts is not to recognize the distinct unity between the playwright and his audience. Ben Jonson recognizes this:

From Flaccus' censure you have set him free,
Kindly reversing the unjust decree,
What Horace blamed, the world by you is taught
T' have been the age's not the author's fault.

Plautus accepts this oneness with his public; he does not place any blame for his work upon any depravity in the public taste

as did Lope de Vega who frankly stooped to please and that for gold merely:

. . . . for since the public pay,
'Tis just, methinks, I by their compass steer,
And write the nonsense that they love to hear.

In Plautus' case we have a playwright and a public in a childishly carefree, happy mood, finding in everything grist for its "mill of laughter." There had been moral depression, economic stringency, dread, and fear while Hannibal stalked through Italy or threatened in Africa. Now Rome was established supreme. In psychic reaction, the populace flocked to the theater then as in current post-bellum times. Nor was the laughter a whit acidulated, whether from patrician or plebeian diaphragm. Plautus appealed to a unified populace; for there was not yet between the mass of the people and the *literati* the gap which we find in Terence's day.

Having now shown the honorable essence of Plautine laughter, what in particular can we say of the methods he employed? Return we to Meredith's marking system. Premising Meredith's dual classification, we acknowledge that Plautus is not in the 100 per cent group; but we refuse to class him in any zero group. Failure in one capacity is often but the symbol of genius in another direction.

Plautus wrote no comedies of this "high" type; but he did write one romantic comedy and for the rest ingenious and sparkling farces with here and there a touch of "high" comedy. This statement is made under the limiting definition whereby comedy "consists of an action caused by the conflict of character with character, the characters conditioning the action; farce is an action which conditions the characters and forces them to fit as best they can into the prescribed situations."

But to separate forms in this way is really to dogmatize as much as the eighteenth-century critics who classified comedies into those of incident, manners, and character. These three ingredients are in every comedy though in varying degree. In like manner the lines cannot be drawn hard and fast between pure comedy and farce; in many a play we have, say, comedy in scene 1,

farce in scenes 2 and 3, comedy and farce in scene 4, etc. Farce has not only proved for comic writers an inevitable form but by the test of time acceptable, for according to the definition above many of the world's masterpieces of comic literature are farces. To name a few: Molière, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, *Le Malade Imaginaire*; Beaumarchais, *Barbier de Seville*; Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, *Taming of the Shrew*; Goldsmith, *She Stoops to Conquer*. Those who look askance at a form of art with such an illustrious history, need to free their systems of the last remnants of Aristotelian scorn. Plautus had no fastidious and highly artificial restriction on laughter; like his brother actors, Molière and Shakespeare, he knew that the hypothesis of drama is pantomime, that action is the elemental source of mirth. Rarely does his farce descend to outright burlesque—in some scenes of the *Amphitruo* and the *Mostellaria*. Yet for the most his plots (except the *Captivi*) are purely incidental.

In passing, it is well to define the reference to his romantic comedy. Romantic comedy as such is not a distinct literary genre. It receives no recognition from Meredith beyond the statement that it is "a special study in the poetically comic." It is a form employed by Shakespeare in his *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Tempest*, *Winter's Tale*; by Plautus in the *Rudens*. The setting is removed from the workaday world to scenes distinct by all of nature's world of the woods and the sea. Here we have the "rosy warmth of Romance, moods of poetry and dream delight." The characters are more distinctly representatives of humanity than the usual comic types fitting into workings of everyday society; this "rosy warmth" in which the characters move diffuses over the comic possibilities which the characters would have if viewed in a purely objective attitude of amused observation. The *Rudens* reveals the touch of nature poetry in Plautus. The prologue is by the God Arcturus; the actors are fishermen; there are varied and picturesque descriptions of storms and rescues. Add to this artistic background the dream motif and here is one of his most attractive plays. But even here the lively situations are the stuff of which the play is woven: *iuvenis* vs. *leno*, the quarrels of the slaves, the beatings. Plautus the play producer,

like the short-story writer of today, knows his bag of tricks. But what writer is not in secret conspiracy against his audience?

Plautus has, then, this boundless resource in varied action. And yet the creatures of his genius are not mere puppets in the situation. Where we dissociate development of character from the fabric of the action we find the characters distinct as types, sometimes distinct as individuals. It has been left for Molière to develop the "comedy of character" in the highest form, i.e., the revelation of character carries the play; action is not dominant.

Where we get individuals in Plautus, he leans almost to caricature though without a shred of malice. This gives his creatures more distinctiveness than Terence's. Yet his Euclio is no more overdrawn than Molière's Harpagon. And where in the range of comedy can we find a better psychological analysis than that of the old man Euclio? The physician in the *Menaechmi* is surely drawn from life. The hag Scapha¹ is an individual. Plautus has more than a cabinet of wax figures.

With the moral qualities of his creatures we have not to deal. They have no moral substance; neither have they an immoral substance; like their creator they are amoral. Plautus like Bergson has a social not a moral point of view. Yet he steers clear of evaluation of action in the field of the social; his art impulse restrains him from more than an aesthetic contemplation. In fact, here comes a sense of escape from the rules we know cannot be set aside in the world of reality. On the whole his is a playful attitude, the absence of serious thought in a holiday mind, an appeal to laughter—child laughter. Plautus will not have comedy a moral purgative, Congreve with his *castigat ridendo*, the nun Hrotwitha, Macaulay, Steele, and a host of others contrary notwithstanding. In his characters the "elements are so mixed" as to render absurd a view of such as Steele's "faultily faultless" or disgustingly bad; his is no sentimental comedy perverting all the ordinances of nature for a grain of poetical justice. Like Hazlitt, Plautus kept distinct the functions of the pulpit and the stage; unlike the modern drama of ideas he has no desire to inform or teach. He is the arch-heretic of the didactic heresy. One of his

¹ *Mostellaria*.

characters is his mouthpiece: "At times I've seen the comedian when acting repeat sayings in a wise manner and be applauded for them . . . but when each person went thence his own way home there wasn't one after the fashion which they had recommended." If he feels himself growing sententious, he checkmates with a "*sed iam satis est philosophatum.*" So although the public is laughed at to its face, it is not as Shaftesbury says in his essay "reprehended for its follies so as to make it think itself contemned." No Pharisaism corrupts the artist in him by utter disgust or contempt for vice.

We must approach Plautus as Lamb did the Restoration comedy—refuse for the moment to take serious views. The figures that walk the stage are subjects neither of approval or disapproval but of temporary acceptance. Said Lamb, "These creatures do not offend my moral sense; in fact they do not appeal to it at all." Yet Macaulay most solemnly undertook to refute Lamb.

Plautus laughed with and not at his characters; he was a true *syngelast*. Unlike Strindberg, he does not find the joy of life in "violent and cruel struggle." The fertility of the soul complex, the joy of ultimate analysis, food for the naturalists, did not trouble him. Perhaps, therefore, his plays will prove more "permanently pleasurable" than these. Yet spare him the lorgnette of a Macaulay or a Gosson or a Jeremy Collier.

A word about situation and language in his plays. With his basic purpose of *faire rire*, he is inventive to the extreme. In the *Mostellaria* scheme follows scheme beginning with a ghost story and ending with an exchange of real estate. The *Menaechmi* is a totality of comic situations. The *Euclio* is diverting in more than one place; most vivid the scene in which we see Euclio in argument with his slave, *chassé* back and forth in a mechanical way truly Bergsonian. Often the situation is mere wit-combat. For that Plautus falls back on the comic expressed by language, and that failing, on the comic created by it. "Words, words words"—almost logorrhea. "Inversion," "repetition," "reciprocal interference," were never so well defined as in the practice of this careless, heated artist. All too often these definitions are

wrenched to the grotesque; if we would have the grain we must take the chaff with it. Even so did the mighty Shakespeare, and was bid of Ben Jonson to revise. It would be interesting to compare MSS had some purist of Cicero's day re-written Plautus. Meters trimmed, characters whitewashed, barbarisms excerpted, local color restricted to Greece—no longer would there be "a Turk wearing the neckwear of a Christian and a Roman in tight breeches," as Lope de Vega remarked of the Spanish comedy of his day; no longer "explosive wit dropping its trains of many-colored fire"; blue-penciled "invitor invitassitis," "Thalem talento" and other instances of "false wit." Plautus in the original would have no better defense than such a chilled and labored reconstruction on the part of some Roman Bentley. He would need no essay of Lamb to defend his puns, either those of straight gait or those "defective in one leg." In fact, reconstruction, leading to reversion to type, might do him more justice than he deserves.

Sic Plautus. He laughed loudly but not in scorn. He laughed thoughtlessly but not so as to discredit the laughter of the intellect. His laughter was hearty, not a "whiffling husky cachinnation as thru wool," for he believed with Carlyle that "the man who cannot laugh is not only fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; but his whole life is already a treason and a stratagem." Plautus gave society not a pedestal but a laugh at itself, the uncritical laughter of a child—*le secousse spasmodique*, which is ours when we seize the comic essence of life as it comes, directly and completely. If other reasons were as plenty as blackberries, this one would be sufficient to establish his comic genius. He made laughter a privilege and a delight; and so laid the chill ghost of Aristotle.